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NSC STAFF FOR PASCUAL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2018

TAGS: PGOV SOCI KIRF KISL EG

SUBJECT: EGYPT'S COPTIC LEADER ON RELATIONS WITH ISLAM, THE GOVERNMENT

REF: CAIRO 224

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reason 1.4 (b).

1.(C) Summary: During the Ambassador's May 12 introductory call on Coptic Pope Shenouda III, Shenouda discussed Christian-Muslim and church-state relations. He said Egypt's Copts enjoy good relations with moderate Muslims, but not with "fanatic" Muslims - a category that he said included Egypt's Grand Mufti and the Muslim Brotherhood. Shenouda also criticized aspects of Egypt's legal structure - the government's automatic designation of children of converts to Islam as Muslims and its refusal to recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity - as unjust and discriminatory. End summary.

2.(C) Shenouda, who appeared to be in good health despite a recent unscheduled trip to U.S. for medical treatment, said he and Egypt's Coptic community enjoy excellent relations with moderate Muslims. He described President Mubarak as a moderate, spoke of his friendship with the Sheikh of Al Azhar, Mohammed Tantawi, Egypt's ranking Islamic cleric, and his good relationship with Minister of Awqaf Mahmoud Hamdy Zaqzouq, who supervises Egypt's mosques. He contrasted these warm relationships with the difficulties he has with "fanatic" Muslims who he views as a danger to Egypt's Coptic minority. He included the Grand Mufti of the Republic, Ali Goma'a, in the "fanatic" category and said he has no relationship with him, adding "I'll just say nothing about him." He blamed "fanatics" for media attacks on the Coptic Church and physical attacks on churches.

3.(C) Shenouda labeled the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as "fanatics" and said the organization was "against" Christians. According to Shenouda, the MB intends to rule by Islamic law, but only according to its version of Islamic law. Shenouda said the MB labels not only Christians as "unbelievers," but also Muslims who do not share its vision of Islamic law.

4.(C) Prompted by a question from the Ambassador regarding the U.S.' role in fostering interfaith understanding, Shenouda turned to what he described as inherent problems in Egypt's legal structure that disadvantage Copts. Shenouda said that few Christians are appointed as professors, judges or to high-level positions in the military or security services. While Shenouda did not request specific U.S. action, he expressed concern regarding two legal issues. The first relates to Egyptian courts' legal interpretation that minor children of fathers who convert to Islam must be considered Muslims, regardless of the children's wishes. Shenouda described the case of Mario and Andrew Medhat, brothers ages 11 and 13, whose father converted to Islam several years ago, while the boys' mother remained Christian.

According to a ruling by an Egyptian administrative court, the two boys, as the children of a father who converted to

Islam, are considered Muslims, and, therefore, are required to participate in Islamic religious education classes in their public school. The boys, who assert that they remain Christian (and live with their mother) are appealing the ruling. Egypt's Ministry of Education has declined to enforce the court's ruling, pending the outcome of the boys' appeal.

5.(C) The second legal issue Shenouda raised involves Christian reconverts - Egyptians who were born as Christians, converted to Islam (in some cases, to avoid Coptic Church restrictions on divorce) and then reasserted their Christian identity. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior (MoI) refuses to recognize such reconversions, although Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court ordered the MoI to do so in a February 9, 2008 ruling (reftel). Shenouda said that the February ruling was problematic because the court wrote in its opinion that official documents issued by the MoI to reconverts must reflect that the holder was "formerly Muslim." Shenouda also noted that the MoI has not yet implemented the ruling.

6.(SBU) Background: Litigation continues with regard to the reconverts. In early March, a lawyer, apparently acting in his own behalf, filed a legal challenge to the implementation of the February ruling. On March 4, the Cairo Administrative Court referred a number of other cases dealing with reconverts to Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court. That court, Egypt's highest, is scheduled to hear arguments on July 7 on the question of whether Article 2 of Egypt's Constitution - which establishes Islam as the state religion and Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation - prohibits the state from recognizing conversions away from Islam.

SCOBAY